

Christian Dialogue with Non-Christians

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Available at <http://global-dialogue.com/swidlerbooks/muslim.htm>

From the first year of its existence the *Journal*, at least to a limited extent, dealt with religious dialogue beyond the circle of Christians. Quite appropriately the non-Christians first turned toward were the Jews. Efforts have expanded in that area and will continue even more so in the future. With Number 1 of Volume 5 JES moves still further into the dialogue between Christians and non-Christians. Several authors wrestle with problems inherent in the confrontation between the world religions.

Until recently there really did not seem to be any problem for the Christian when he faced the non-Christian religions. There was no problem because the vast majority of Christians almost never encountered a non-Christian religion-except Judaism, and it was usually pigeon-holed by conversion, ghettoizing and oppression. The only other contact the average Christian had with non-Christian religions was either through some exotic stories or promotion of Christian foreign missions. But this relative isolation is growing dramatically less possible for the average Christian because of a variety of reasons, prominent among which is the explosion of mass communications and mass travel. As a consequence Christians are now becoming aware that they do have a problem in the confrontation with non-Christians.

It used to be quite clear that the Christian attitude toward non-Christian religions should be that of one having the truth over against error; the consequent actions for the Christian was to promote conversion wherever possible. Perhaps most Christians felt (and many still do) that non-Christians were so hopelessly mired in error that if they were not converted to Christianity they would be eternally lost. However, as Christian theologians began to know more and more about non-Christian religions, many similarities with Christianity were perceived. Complete rejection of other religions as totally erroneous became rather difficult under those circumstances.

One theological response to this new situation was to set up a comparative scale, with Christianity as the standard against which other religions were to be measured-much as the Roman Catholic Church did with itself vis-à-vis other Christian Churches (cf. *Constitution on the Church*), or Orthodox theologians do. Whatever was found in Islam, Hinduism, etc. that was the same as in Christianity was true and good, and to the degree the particular non-Christian religion approximated Christianity (read: Catholicism, Orthodoxy, *vel alii*), to that degree it was good and true-but, of course, why be satisfied with half or even three-quarter measures?

Today, however, this rather imperialistic and self-centered attitude is felt by many Christians to be no longer (if it ever was) appropriate. It is felt that Christians must be much less self-confident in the face of God's Providence. They must come to the other religions, which have been on earth for hundreds and even thousands of years, with a humility that seeks to learn what roles they play in God's Providence, in what ways they manifest God to man, how they lead man toward salvation. As the Second Vatican Council has so dramatically restated, the Spirit is not confined within the Roman Catholic Church-nor within Christianity! Christians are *obliged* to seek Him wherever He can be found.

But if Christians are to come to the other religions in humility to learn something more of God and His will for man and the world, they must meet them with openness and in dialogue. If Christians are going to be receptive to the truth they must shut off no possible avenue of its approach; they must be open to truth (God) everywhere, and follow it when it is found, even when it means a

modifying or abandoning of earlier presumedly unchangeable positions (e.g., the complete reversal of the Papacy on religious freedom, from Gregory XVI in 1832 to John XXIII in 1963).

If Christians are going to be involved in dialogue they must listen to the other person. But if they are really listening to the other person, they must be open to the possibility of being persuaded by him. If they are not, they are not really listening, but are just preparing to answer. And if the Spirit is in some way speaking through the other person, they will not hear Him-of what greater sin can a Christian be convicted than refusing to hearken to the Spirit?

But if the stance of the Christian toward non-Christian religions is to be that of openness and dialogue, what of conversion? what of the whole missionary enterprise? This is a very complex and agonized problem that cannot be analyzed, let alone solved, in an editorial. In fact, it will not be solved by any one person, but will yield only to much thought and experimentation-and error-by many deeply concerned Christians and non-Christians all over the world and in all stations of life.

What does seem clear is that Christians are called upon to witness to Christ before the whole world, and that an essential element of this witness is serving the world. Thus it is clear that the Christian is following the Gospel if, for example, when living among Muslims he serves their needs, as through teaching, medical work, etc. If a Muslim, because of this witness, becomes a Christian, "God be praised." If he should not decide to become a Christian, "God be praised." But the Christian does not serve the needs of the Muslim neighbor in order to entice him into Christianity, but rather because he loves him as his neighbor.

It also seems clear that Christians ought not approach and attempt to convert, say, Hindus who are informed and committed, but must come to them in openness and dialogue. But what of those who are largely ignorant and indifferent or, at most, superstitious (perhaps like many millions of nominal Catholics among the poor of Latin America)? They must be helped to be able to make a free commitment. But how can they make a *free* commitment if they are in ignorance? Obviously they must have knowledge to act freely, but can a person born into a Buddhist culture be said to make a free religious commitment if he is taught only the best about Christianity and is left in ignorance of the religion of his culture? I believe not. But is it the task of the Christian in a Muslim land to help ignorant Muslims to become better Muslims? I believe yes, in the following sense.

Perhaps the Christian, without in any way denying or hiding his Christian commitment, could, when directly dealing with religious matters, describe the Muslim teaching on the matter as well as he could (perhaps with the help and presence of a Muslim teacher?); he could also describe the Christian teaching, stressing the similarities, without obscuring the differences. Should the man eventually choose to remain Muslim, he would be a much better Muslim than before. Is such a procedure used by any Christian missionaries at present? I do not know. Is such a procedure even practicable? I do not know. But by Gospel command Christians must seek to be present in all lands to witness to Christ. They could not, and should not, avoid having direct confrontation on religious matters. But when it comes it must be open, seeking the truth wherever it may be, and dialogic, listening and speaking to all persons.